

VZCZCXRO8866
OO RUEHCHI RUEHCN RUEHDT RUEHHM
DE RUEHBK #2546/01 2391416
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
O 261416Z AUG 08
FM AMEMBASSY BANGKOK
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 4103
INFO RUEAIIA/CIA WASHINGTON DC IMMEDIATE
RHEFDIA/DIA WASHDC IMMEDIATE
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC IMMEDIATE
RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHINGTON DC IMMEDIATE
RHHMUNA/CDR USPACOM HONOLULU HI IMMEDIATE
RUEHXS/ASSOCIATION OF SOUTHEAST ASIAN NATIONS
RUEHBJ/AMEMBASSY BEIJING 6253
RUEHBY/AMEMBASSY CANBERRA 8956
RUEHUL/AMEMBASSY SEOUL 4830
RUEHKO/AMEMBASSY TOKYO 0974
RUEHWL/AMEMBASSY WELLINGTON 2364
RUEHCHI/AMCONSUL CHIANG MAI 5555

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BANGKOK 002546

SIPDIS

NSC FOR PHU, DRL FOR BUCKLEY

E.O. 12958: DECL: 08/26/2018

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [PINR](#) [TH](#)

SUBJECT: PAD PROTESTS CHALLENGE PM SAMAK'S AUTHORITY, PATIENCE

REF: BANGKOK 2405 (TENSIONS ESCALATE AT THAI STREET PROTESTS)

BANGKOK 00002546 001.2 OF 002

CLASSIFIED BY: DEPUTY CHIEF OF MISSION JAMES F. ENTWISTLE, REASON 1.4
(B) AND (D)

Summary and Comment:

11. (C) Prime Minister Samak's coalition government on August 26 faced one of the biggest challenges to its authority since it took over the reins of power last January, not from the formal parliamentary opposition or the courts, but from the streets. As of late afternoon, large crowds of demonstrators from the Peoples Alliance for Democracy (PAD) occupied the Government House compound that is the Prime Minister/Government's official seat of power, along with several ministries. PAD leader Sonthi Limthongkun appears to be pushing hard for a confrontation, daring security forces to attack him and his supporters. However, Thai police have maintained a passive presence at most venues, avoiding confrontation, and royal Thai Armed forces Supreme Commander General Boonsang Niampradit insisted there would be no coup regardless of the demonstrations.

12. (C) Whether this is a last gasp effort by the PAD to provoke a response by security forces that will topple the government, or part of a more sustained effort at pressuring the Prime Minister into dissolving the House remain unclear at the end of the first day of the latest PAD street actions. While authorities allowed the PAD to take over the Government House compound August 26, that is not a situation that can be sustained indefinitely as Sonthi and Samak wage a war of nerves. The form the government/security reaction eventually takes will shape the political future of both the PAD and Prime Minister Samak's government. End summary and comment.

PAD goes on the offensive

13. (SBU) In the latest twist in Thailand's on-going political drama, the Peoples Alliance for Democracy (PAD) staged a mass demonstration in Bangkok and strategic points around the country in a what some press sources are reporting as a last bid show-down with the Peoples Power Party (PPP) led government of Samak Sundaravej. Kraissak Choonhaven, Democrat party MP and deputy party leader, told us that the PAD leaders had laid out their intentions to him late August 25; the PAD hoped to provoke clashes with the police, leading to enough violence and government overreaction to spark military intervention/another coup.

14. (U) The day's activities got off to an unexpected start early on August 26 when some 80 to 100 PAD supporters attempted to take control of the government-run NTB television station between 0430 and 0530. Although Royal Thai Police units responded and arrested a large number of the demonstrators (press reports indicate between 60 and 80), control of the NTB compound and the quality of the transmission varied throughout the day.

15. (SBU) In the end, it appeared the NTB showdown was only the first incident in a series of determined PAD attempts to provoke PM Samak and security forces into a direct confrontation. With surprising efficiency, the PAD executed simultaneous marches on the Ministries of Education, Finance, Agriculture and Transportation, as well as the Government House compound which is the formal seat of the PM and the government. By 1500 they had occupied these ministries and the Government House compound. We have no reliable way to verify the number of demonstrators involved in the day's events; police sources put the number of PAD participants at around 35,000, while two papers, Khao Sot and Kom Chat Lued, estimated the crowd at 100,000, telling us that police were purposefully undercounting the number of protestors.

RTG refuses to take the bait

16. (SBU) From the beginning of the day, police officials like MGEN Surapol Tuanthong told us that they were aware of the PAD's intentions to provoke conflict and had adopted a passive posture intended to avoid confrontation. After the provocative takeovers of government properties, Prime Minister Samak announced in a mid-afternoon press conference after a Cabinet meeting (held at Supreme Command where Samak, also Defense Minister, set up shop rather than remain at Government House) that he would be patient over

BANGKOK 00002546 002.2 OF 002

the PAD effort to topple his government, calling on demonstrators to leave Government House and putting Interior Minister Kowit in charge of restoring order. Samak declined, however, to invoke the Emergency Decree. As of 18:15 PM Samak, in a press briefing, said 80 demonstrators had been arrested and warrants had been issued for the five PAD leaders.

17. (U) While early press reports indicated Army Commander-in-Chief Anupong Paochinda had ordered commanders of the armed forces to prepare to support the police if necessary, should the government decide to invoke emergency measures to restore order, throughout the day the Army clarified that they saw no reason for military intervention. RTARF Supreme Commander General Boonsang Niampradit insisted the military would not stage a coup or intervene, despite the possibility of violence at PAD rallies.

18. (SBU) While Samak was speaking at the Supreme Command, PAD leader Sonthi delivered his own statement on a stage the PAD had erected on the grounds of Government House. Sonthi vowed he would stay until there was a change in government and challenged the government to a fight. He dared the government to use force to end the occupation of the Government House compound and urged his followers to "fight until the end."

Democrats wring hand on the sidelines

19. (C) Isra Sunthornvut, Secretary to the Leadership of the Opposition in the House, told us that he believed the August 26 demonstrations signaled the end of the PAD. He said there was some chance that the PAD could gain some political capital for appearing as though they were the only ones standing up against the government, but he assessed their only real hope was if Samak did something "stupid." Isra said that while the Democratic Party did not support the PAD in this effort, the PAD rally had put them in an awkward position. In the end, Isra said, the PAD was playing into the government's hands by demonstrating to the rest of the country that the PAD really stood for chaos and instability.

110. (U) The consular section is following the situation closely and

so far has no indication that Amcits are at risk as a result of
today's events.
John